

**The League and the Woman Question** ---a contribution to the discussion  
(Internal Bulletin #6 – 1968 – Submitted by the Toronto Branch Commission on Woman)

The experience of the Toronto League-Youth Commission on Woman in preparing and presenting the brief to the Royal Commission, and in presenting a Vanguard Forum on this topic has been fruitful both internally and externally. The publication of the League brief in pamphlet form has given the movement its first rounded piece of literature for widely circulating our views on this topic. This fact, however, shows that we have only initially begun to deal with the woman question on a serious political level, and the results of this initial venture point the way to much more serious work in the future.

Why was this venture so successful? A number of interesting facts regarding the consciousness of Canadian women came to light while the government commission toured the country. Women from all walks of life seized this opportunity to express their anger and frustration at the discrimination and injustice they suffer in Canada today. A widespread discontent over existing laws and customs was shown. *Chatelaine*, Canada's #1 woman's magazine, published an anonymous questionnaire to which a phenomenal 11,000 women responded. The results of this questionnaire revealed a high percentage of women in favor of far-reaching reforms. The Quebec respondents, 94% Roman Catholics, voted 10–20% higher than their English Canadian counterparts in favor of a freer approach to marriage, work and education laws.

Why is this discontent becoming apparent now? Over the past years a number of factors have contributed towards freeing North American women from their traditionally narrow role in society. One of the main factors is of course the availability of the *birth control* pill. The increasing control woman has over her body has allowed a whole layer of young women to emerge who challenge the old precepts regarding woman's role. The "sexual revolution", while not widespread throughout society, has led many women to challenge the double standard regarding sex, and from there to reassess their whole position in society.

Concurrent with this the labor market has opened its doors to women on a massive scale. At present we are witnessing a stage in the development of the Canadian economy when it increasingly requires the service of women. Women now make up over 1/3 of the Canadian work force. On the other side of the coin, Canadian women are finding that, with the rising cost of living, they have to work steadily in order to supplement the family income. Today Canadian women are playing an increasingly more active and stable role in the productive process.

It is as a result of these and other factors that Canadian women are becoming increasingly aware of the contradictions of their position — of the fossilized laws, traditions and customs which still surround them and which tie them to antiquated myths and needless sufferings.

The Royal Commission provided Canadian women with an opportunity to voice their protest. When the Commission ceases to exist they will search for new opportunities and new vehicles of protest. The experience we had here in Toronto around the Royal Commission demonstrated to us the depth of the discontent that exists amongst sections of Canadian women and has convinced us that we must reassess our attitude to

this area of activity in order to ensure that our intervention and participation is as effective as possible. We found that our ideas as expressed in the brief(s) *The Status of Women / Statut de la Femme (LSA/LSO)* were well received by the participants at the hearings. Many women, groping for answers themselves, grasped at any worked-out analysis; others welcomed one as broad and sweeping as ours. We sold over 100 copies of the brief and almost as many YSFs – *Young Socialist Forum magazine* and were amongst the only participants whose ideas were applauded. We met a number of excellent contacts — one wanted to join the League right away! Furthermore we found the issues of the *Workers' Vanguard* containing the articles on the Royal Commission assisted considerably in selling subs to women during the sub drive.

As members of an organization that seeks to solidarize itself with the struggle of all oppressed peoples, we in the LSA/LSO must be alert to all possibilities to identify ourselves with, and advance the struggle for, women's rights. We are the only organization that has a correct understanding, analysis and program on the question of women's rights. We have a heavy responsibility to ensure that we are doing all we can to promote this question both internally and externally. Furthermore, historically women have moved to radical positions rapidly during periods of social upheaval. The character of women's struggles in the past has gained momentum from radicalization going on around them. We can look forward to this process taking place in Canada as well.

Where will the discontent find its expression?

### 1. The Trade Union Movement

In the pamphlet "The Power and the Dilemma of the Trade Unions" we discuss how the trade union movement had failed women miserably, how it has proved incapable of organizing the vast numbers of women workers. We discuss how "large numbers of these workers (the unorganized)...have fallen prey to the capitalist inspired propaganda that the union movement is a narrow, a sectional power bloc, insensitive to their needs and too concerned only with its own welfare." Because the trade union movement has been so insensitive to the struggle for women's rights, women do not see this movement as their potential champion; they are unable to identify their struggle with the class struggle. There are a number of demands we can raise in the trade union movement to combat this situation. Organize the unorganized! Equal opportunities! Equal pay for equal work — with trade union control over job definitions! Day care centers at the place of work! Trade unionists must be brought to understand how continued discrimination against women is a constant threat to gains already won by the trade union movement.

### 2. The New Democratic Party

The NDP has a modest program in the area of women's rights but one that affirms a number of key principles. It calls for child care centers for housewives and working mothers, taxation credit for all full time mothers, and crediting housewives with a salary basis for a pension they will later receive. Yet at the same time as it is formulating a position that tentatively identifies itself with women's struggle for equal rights, the NDP has failed to promote equal participation by women within its own ranks. We demand not only that the NDP adopt a far reaching program in this area (see demands raised in LSA brief), but also that the NDP bring more women into its leadership and run more women candidates. We should win our contacts in this area to the NDP on the basis of a class understanding of the woman question,

### 3. Ad Hoc Organizations

In the coming period we can expect the ebb and flow of ad hoc organizations on questions of women's rights. Committees such as Laura Sabia's committee for more equal taxation laws, the consumer-boycott committees and abortion committees have found support for their issues and committees of this type will continue to spring up. Such groups can play a valuable role in fostering and directing pressure on the government for reforms which can be won now. At the same time groups of this type are essentially petit bourgeois in constitution. But because the question of woman's rights is seen by the vast majority as one that transcends class lines, such super-class organisations have the potential of mobilizing broad sections of Canadian women. We support these committees as we support all organizations that are formed to combat any aspect of woman's oppression. It is important that the League maintain contact with groups of this type, influence them towards the NDP and win over the best elements to our own ranks.

#### 4. The LSA

Concurrent with the intervention of our comrades in these various organizations and activities, the League must continue to demonstrate its solidarity with the struggle of women for equal rights through its own external organs. We must continue to promote the pamphlet, carry periodic articles on this question in the *Workers' Vanguard*, and occasionally have discussions on this topic at our forums.

#### 5. Women in the League

Within the context of the activity around the Royal Commission, the establishment of the League-Youth Commission began a discussion within the movement which went further than the formal educationals and reports to the branch meetings. The whole branch raised its understanding of the woman question. Yet we should not overlook the fact that the general problem of woman's position in society finds its reflection within the movement. We are all moulded by the society we live in and strongly influenced by it even after we join the revolutionary socialist movement. We cannot prevent ourselves from assuming many of the prejudices, customs and attitudes that are predominant in Canada today. This is something we must bear in mind when we consider the participation of women in our movement. Women in our society do not readily view themselves as leaders nor do men so readily accept women as leaders. Similarly women may often find it difficult to come to grips with theoretical and analytical work — their whole background has directed them away from activity of this type. It is all too easy for women comrades to drift into purely organisational work, or to view their contribution to the movement solely in terms of their office skills. This is something we must take into account when we recruit women comrades, and integrate them into the activity of the movement. This problem will be resolved in part as more younger women, who are freer from many of the customs and attitudes that inhibited women in the past, enter the movement. We can already see this process at work in the North American radical movement where a number of young women, benefiting from the liberalising atmosphere and using their own initiative, now play leading roles.

But we should not overlook the conscious role the leadership of the movement must play in this process. It is essential that the leadership set the tone within the movement to allow both men and women comrades to overcome attitudes on this question which society has engrained into them. It is essential that we provide opportunities for women comrades which they might not otherwise seek out for themselves.

It is very important that when women are recruited, they be informed of the movement's position regarding women, and told that they are expected to develop as

full-fledged revolutionaries, rather than play the role which society expects of them. Just as we would not recruit a black comrade without informing him or her of our position on the black struggle, we should not recruit a woman comrade without explaining our position on the woman question.

It should go without saying that women who join the movement at the same time as their husbands, should receive an individual recruitment discussion. Even if she does not regard herself as an individual – which is common – she should be treated as one.

A key area of the movement's work which we have tended in the past to regard as men's work should be consciously opened up to women comrades. This is trade union work. With women playing an increasingly significant role on the work force, it is important that we direct women comrades, where possible, into strategically important job locations and integrate them fully into trade union fractions.

In conclusion, we should continue to assign personnel on a modest basis to the League Commission on women to keep abreast of developments and take advantage of developments, and to take advantage of opportunities as they come up.

The seeds of the revolutionary society must be sewn in the revolutionary party NOW. While we understand that the existing prejudices regarding women imposed upon us by capitalism will take generations to eradicate, the best guarantee of our success will be developing within the revolutionary party women leaders who are . not merely women leaders but fully developed human beings.

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